

Structure of the Chinese Religion

下田 淳[†]

SHIMODA Jun

1. Introduction

It is said that Chinese religions are a syncretism of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These three religions don't coexist separately, but are connected or mixed. But how are these religions "syncretized"? What structure has this syncretism?

I try to explain the system of this syncretism in this short article. I call Chinese religions the Chinese Religion as a whole in this article. To analyze of the structure of the Chinese Religion, I needed many literature that are listed in the last pages.

Christianity, Islam, Buddhism et. are regarded as "advanced religions" because these have systematic doctrines. But "primitive religions", though they don't have written story, are (were) also systematic, as Levi-Strauss explained in his researches of "primitive people".

I think that "advanced religions" explain the world after death clearly and advocate the salvation after death. "Primitive religions" think reliefs only in this world if I say this thing easily. Is the Chinese Religion an "advanced religion" ?

2. Confucianism

Confucianism is a highly systematic religion to ancestry. In Confucianism there are no heaven and no hell. All including the soul after death exist between the sky and the ground.

A human being consists of the soul and the flesh. After death, this soul and flesh divides and the soul floats in the sky. Chinese did open-air burial in the primitive ages. A dead body became a skeleton. It was buried (with a tomb) except a skull.

Ancient Chinese performed a ceremony in which a soul moves to the ground and is integrated with a skull. To lure a soul, people burnt incense, sprinkled alcoholic drinks. A descendant wore a skull. In course of time, a wooden tablet replaced a skull. Wooden tablets of ancestors were kept in a mausoleum of a clan. With a ceremony to lure ancestors' souls and unite them with wooden tablets, ancestors resurrect logically. A Japanese scholar KAJI call it "lure-soul and return to life" (syōkon-saisei, cf. literature 40, 41). Ancestors resurrect in this world and can meet descendants logically.

This ceremony was performed already before Shang dynasty at the anniversary of an ancestor. After the ceremony a soul of an ancestor divides from a wooden tablet and rise up the sky again. Common people that didn't have a mausoleum of a clan visit families' tombs in the spring and performed "lure-soul and return to life", which became Qingming Festival. And later people set an altar in one's house and kept wooden tablets of ancestors.

It is true that Confucianism don't say salvation in the next world but it differs from easy

ancestor worship that aims for favors in this world. It represents eternal revivals of ancestors' souls.

Confucius and his followers added philosophical and ethical thinking to this traditional ancestor worship and ceremony, for example the concept of “filial piety”. Five classics (Wǔjīng) is “Bible” of Confucianism. A vast number of literature about five classics were written and philosophy of Confucianism developed. Many scholars did a very good job as Zhu Xi. The concept as “yin and yang” or “Wǔ Xíng” originated also from Confucianism. But these details are not task of this survey.

By the way a rite of a god of the sky (Shàngdì) was institutionalized by Han dynasty. Also gods of ground became ceremonial. From the concept “Wǔ Xíng” a scholar invented five sky gods and six gods with Shàngdì, but Confucianism is different from polytheism.

As Buddhism came into China, it had to compromise with the ancestor worship of Confucianism. Chinese Buddhism adopted the ceremony of “lure-soul and return to life” (syōkon-saisei). Chinese Buddhism made a ceremony of a ghost festival (Yu Lan Jie).

I mentioned that “advanced religions” explain the world after death clearly and advocate the salvation after death. In this meaning Confucianism isn't enough and the ways of favors in this world also not enough. Therefore Taoism reinforced Confucianism in this world and Buddhism did it in the next world.

3. Taoism

Taoism is composed of three elements: Philosophy of Lǎozǐ and Zhuāngzǐ, the arts of xiāns and magic words or amulets (cf. literature 88, 89) .

Lǎozǐ calls the origin of the world (universe) Tao. Tao isn't existence, but nothing. Nothing produces existence. Zhuāngzǐ mentions that chaos produced the world. In Chinese mythology the world was chaos of the form of an egg first. 18000 years later a god named Pángǔ was born from chaos. Pángǔ produced the world and human being. Thinking of Lǎozǐ and Zhuāngzǐ originates in this myth. Their philosophy said that the world and human come from Tao (nothing) and go to Tao. Existence dies to nothing and nothing bears life (existence). This philosophy didn't develop afterward and so didn't become an “advanced religion”.

Xiāns are not die and ascend in the sky, and become gods. To be a xiān, a monk meditates and tries to mystic union with gods or Tao. This is a sort of mysticism. But this philosophy also didn't develop to an “advanced religion”. The arts of xiāns, that is, arts of long life in this world developed instead: physical exercises, walking, breath, food, medicine, acupuncture, moxibustion, massage, meditation et., that led to the Chinese medicine.

The Chinese alchemy and the art of breath were important particularly. People made alchemies from minerals, metals and plants. It was said gold and cinnabar as the best. But plants would be effective, therefore the “Chinese herbology” developed. The art of breath aims also for the long life. There were many arts of breath. To make an alchemy in one's own body was a union of the art of breath and alchemy.

The third element was magic words or amulets. In China demons are inferior souls because they couldn't become ancestors. People call superior souls (ancestors) "god". This means that superior souls rank with various gods in China. People had to deify gods and demons to avoid bad luck and get good luck. Magic words and amulets were used for this purpose. There were a great number of the variation. They aim for favors in this world. Therefore it was very popular.

From the age of the Han dynasty some religious organizations were built. In the age of the Tang dynasty Taoist temples were built for the first time, though shrines of gods(for example Lǎozǐ) existed long before. In a temple a priest of Taoism (Daoshi) lives and holds a ceremony. To be a Daoshi it needs a license.

New many gods appeared on the stage, for example, Guān Yǔ, a hero of a romance of the "History of Three Kingdoms". Yuánshǐ Tiānzūn, Língbǎo Tiānzūn, Dàode Tiānzūn (Lǎozǐ) are Three Pure Ones (Sānqīng) and the highest gods. And Taoism have a great number of gods (over 300). It worships also Buddhist "gods" as Guānyīn, even Confucius. Surprising polytheism. Gods connected with various favors in this world (analogy with Catholic saints worship). From 5th century statues came to be built under the influence of Buddhism.

Taoism puts emphasis on this world but wasn't always interested in the next world. Taoism divide the world into the sky, ground and underground. The sky is the world of xiāns and gods, ground is the world of living beings and underground is the death world=netherworld or afterworld. As few people can into the sky word, common people go into netherworld after one's death. It was said the netherworld is under Mount Tàì. The netherworld would be primitive concept of Chinese people.

The netherworld is neither heaven nor hell. Chinese thought netherworld to be the same world of this world. The netherworld differs from Confucian death concept, but perhaps by connecting with the concept of the netherworld, people thought that a soul comes from netherworld and united with a wooden tablet or a skeleton in a tomb ("lure-soul and return to life" =syōkon-saisei).

Buddhism introduced the concept of the hell. If people identify the netherworld with the hell, the netherworld would change to the pain world. The worlds of metempsychosis in Buddhism canged to "world of xiāns", "human word" and "world of demons". At the first terminology and concepts were in confusion, but Buddhism reinforced gradually the concept of the world after death that was ambiguous in Taoism.

Philosophy of Lǎozǐ and Zhuāngzǐ couldn't develop. The original purpose that people become xiāns in the next world couldn't also make an "advanced religion". Taoism developed as popular religion that aims for favors in this world. It was Buddhism that reinforce or make the relief in the next world.

4. Buddhism

First of all we must begin with India to understand Chinese Buddhism. Buddhism originated in Hinduism that regards Moksha out of metempsychosis as the identity

of Brahman and Atman. Gautama Buddha denies Brahman and Atman. By denying the both, it can led to Moksha. This state of mind is Nirvana. A person that led to Nirvana is called “Buddha”.

Gautama Buddha preached “anitya”(Sanskrit) that means “impermanence”, anattā (Pali) that means “non-self“, “ariya atthangika magga” (Pali) that means “noble eightfold path” et. But the details are not task of this article.

In early Buddhism people had to practice religious austerities to be Buddha. The importance of individual religious austerities led to Theravāda Buddhism. So common believers gave monks food and so on, by which they expected relief. Rich believers offered a temple and a stupa (pagoda). Before the appearance of Buddhārūpa (statues of Buddhism) in the first century, pagodas were the object of the worship of common believers. Now it is so in the Theravāda Buddhism.

In the middle of B.C. first century Mahāyāna Buddhism appeared that aims for relief of all people. Anyone could be Buddha. It was a bodhisattva-religion. Bodhisattva(s) stay in this world and make a vow for being Buddha of all people. Bodhisattva could be Buddha but help relief of all persons in this world. So when people believe bodhisattvas, anyone can Buddha. This is easy idea in a meaning.

From first century statues of Buddhism came to be made, first in Gandhāra or Mathura. I think that the appearance of statues was connected with Mahāyāna Buddhism because it needed visual objects to spread Mahāyāna Buddhism. In a meaning it was the same logic with medieval Catholicism.

Pure Land (Buddhakserta in Sanskrit) Buddhism, whose texts are “Infinite Life Sūtra,” “Amitābha Sūtra and “Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra”, was very important for Chinese Buddhism. Amitābha made Pure Land. This is a sort of Heaven. Amitābha Buddha’s wish is that all persons go into the Pure Land. When people believe Amitābha, they can become Buddha in the Pure Land.

In the 7th century Buddhism became esoteric. Vajrayāna or tantric Buddhism aimed for the union of the self and Buddha. This is a sort of mysticism. A fakir used three elements: magic words, meditation and hand gestures (mudras) that lead to Nirvana. The teaching of Vajrayāna is called tantra. Magic words are dhāranī and mantra. The concept of Vajrayāna is visualized by a mandala. Afterward tantric Buddhism was swallowed by tantric Hinduism. This meant the end of Buddhism in India.

5. Chinese Buddhism

The translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese began in the second century. First Buddhist terminology was translated with Taoist one. Chinese understood Gautama Buddha as a xiān. A false text that Lǎozǐ went to India and became Gautama was written. In this way Buddhism and Taoism had a point of contact from the first.

After the early disorder, Chinese Buddhism was ordered gradually and all eight schools

appeared in the age of the Sui and Tang dynasties: Tiantai, Huayan, Madhyamaka (Sanskrit), Yogācāra (Sanskrit), Vinaya (Pali and Sanskrit), Chan (Zen in Japanese), Zhēnyán (Vajrayāna) and Jìngtǔzōng (a school of Pure Land). Of these schools three was important for Chinese Buddhism: Jìngtǔzōng, Chan and Zhēnyán (Vajrayāna).

The founder Chan (Zen) is Bodhidharma (?~A. D. 536). He came from India. This school aims for being Buddha by “Zazen”(zuòchán) and meditation. It is a sort of mysticism.

Jìngtǔzōng, a school of Pure Land in China came to use “Nianfo”, a short phrase, “Nāmó Ēmítuófó”. When people chant only this Nianfo, they can be Buddha in Pure Land easily. Chinese thought that they spend a pleasure life in the Pure Land. Nianfo guaranteed also favors in this world. The powerful relieves by Nianfo in this and that world are a transfiguration of Indian Buddhism in China.

In the 8th century Vajrayāna came from India. Chinese Vajrayāna (Zhēnyán) took esoteric rites, mudras dhāraṇīs, mantras, mandalas that were used for getting favors in this world mainly. Vajrayāna influenced other Chinese Buddhist schools, that tended to put emphasis on favors in this world, except Jìngtǔzōng and Chan. “Vajrayānalised” Chinese Buddhism adopted many prayers from Taoism. Taoism had much better arts of the favors in this world than Buddhism. It is said that Chinese Vajrayāna disappeared in the last period of the Tang dynasty, but I think it was swallowed by Taoism.

Buddhism contributed to reinforce the concept of the next world of Chinese. In Confucianism there are the concept of “lure-soul and return to life” (syōkon-saisei). On the other hand Taoism has the world of xiāns and gods in the sky, and netherworld after death of common people. Anyway the systematic idea of the world after death wasn’t clear in China. Buddhism introduced the concept of hell and Pure Land. From age of the Song dynasty Chan and Tiantai adopted also the idea of the Pure Land and Nianfo. Chan regarded Nianfo as a sort of meditation, and Chan and Jìngtǔzōng schools approached together.

Only Chan and Jìngtǔzōng survived in China. The meditation of Chan approached Taoist one. Nianfo to get favors in this world also was close to Taoist arts. In the age of Song dynasty Chan temples were the most.

6. Conclusion-Structure of the Chinese Religion

Mahāyāna Buddhism was transfigured from the early Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism changed much and was swallowed by Confucianism and Taoism finally. The Chinese Religion has Confucianism as core and Taoism surrounds it. Buddhism was swallowed by ancestor worship (Confucianism) and favors in this world (Taoism) but reinforced or made the concept of the next world: hell(s) and Pure Land (a sort of Heaven).

When I think about the Chinese Religion as the whole, it couldn’t make a systematic idea of the correlation between life and death in contrast with Christianity, Islam and Buddhism or Hinduism because the ideas of “lure-soul and return to life” (syōkon-saisei) of Confucianism, netherworld or xiāns’ world of Taoism and hell(s) and Pure Land of Buddhism coexists, no,

only mixed.

In this meaning the Chinese Religion isn't an "advanced religion". Of course it has no "Bible". As it is however by supported strong philosophies of scholars, in particular, of Confucians, it doesn't surrender to foreign "advanced religions". I understand the Chinese Religion is a "China-limited unique advanced religion". Thought the Chinese Religion was oppressed by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), it survived and will survive in the future.

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